

# Sexism in Women's Sports History

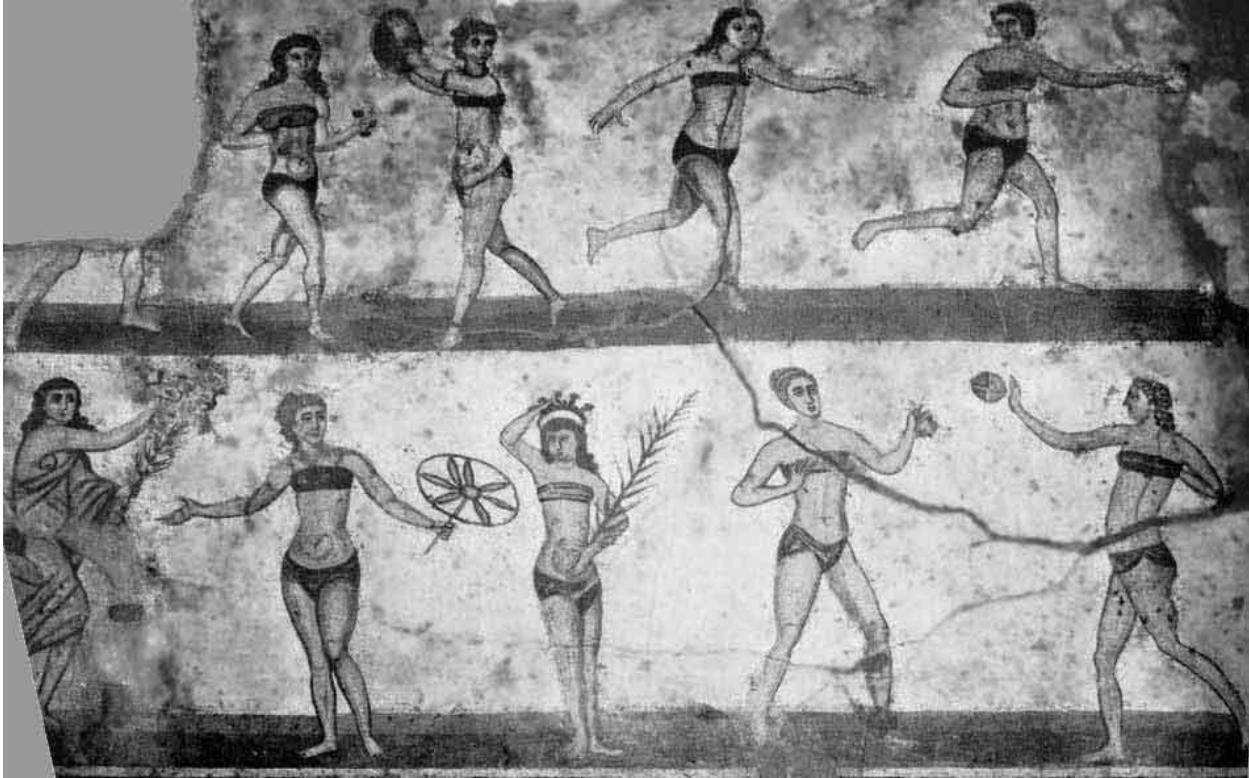
By Stella Crouch and Katie Marie

It feels as though we should have left behind old sexist ideas around women's health and anatomy, however it is frightening just how many of them seem to have stuck around and still play a role in society's perceptions of women in sports. While this article obviously can't cover all of the instances in which oppressive patriarchal ideas impact modern women's sports we hope to highlight a few.

People of all genders have obviously participated in sports since its inception however because of the patriarchy men have historically controlled the ways in which sports are played and who can participate. In an effort to thwart women and gender non conforming people from sports we are left with hilarious and saddening examples of reasons men have come up with to keep sports male dominated.

In ancient Greece during the original olympics many male athletes and judges claimed that if women engaged in "too many male behaviors" their insides would begin to wither away making them less and less fertile until their uterus would eventually be absorbed into their bodies. Some even went as far as to say that women would start to grow a penis and facial hair if they participated in sports. This would serve as a root for the later excuse to exclude women from sports citing that their uterus would fall out.

In Plato's Republic, logically inferring that men and women should have equal education, one speaker identifies a problem in regards to the gymnasiums. He said that it was good to suggest the idea of equal education, but in practice it would bring ridicule, "the most ridiculous thing of all will be the sight of women naked in the palaestra, exercising with the men, especially when they are no longer young; they certainly will not be a vision of beauty." (Ancient Greek Olympians played naked). The women created their own, clothed games, called the Haraean games.



Continuing into the middle ages women who engaged in sports were seen as “male impersonators” which often translated to witch. It was thought that these women could somehow magically shape shift into men. The women were often stripped of their clothes in a town square and asked by a priest “on half of god” to show their “inner man”. When they failed to grow a penis from their vulva they were killed (often by hanging or stoning) on the grounds that they were disobeying God. According to Wikipedia, sex verifications are still only performed on women.



The 1890s saw the emergence of the bicycle, which was exceedingly important for women's freedom and mobility. However, the women had to watch out for a scary sounding condition called "bicycle face".



The history of women in modern Olympic games is full of sexist moments and eugenics inspired pseudoscience. If you are interested in more, please check out the further reading links at the bottom of this page.

Women were not allowed to compete at the first modern Olympic games in 1896 in Athens. There were some protests led by suffragette groups, however most of their protests were met with responses from the olympic committee that they were “simply looking out for the health of the female body.” Some suffragettes who protested the all men’s Olympics later said they received letters stating that the Olympics were designed for men. At this time many sports league owners, judges and athletes still thought that women’s bodies could not handle sports and that the only time that their body could possibly handle exertion was during childbirth. Many people argued that women dying in childbirth was not as a result of poor medicine and care but instead a sign of women’s weaknesses.

Founding patriarch of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin said the inclusion of women would be "impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and incorrect."



Women's athletics and team gymnastics debuted at the 1928 Amsterdam summer games. Previously, women were only allowed to participate in less strenuous sports, such as archery, golf, and tennis.

Halina Konopacka won the discus throw event, breaking her own world record and becoming the first Polish Olympic champion. There were reports that the women's 800m race ended with several of the competitors being completely exhausted. These were, of course, widely (and falsely) circulated. Even so, it resulted in the International Olympic Committee deciding that women were too frail for long distance running, and women's Olympic running events were limited to 200m until the 1960s.

At the 1932 Olympic Games, hosted in Los Angeles, California, we saw the first use of the Olympic victory podium, as well as the first Olympic Village, where the male athletes were housed. The women were housed at the Chapman Park Hotel on Wilshire Boulevard.

At the 1932 Olympic Games, Tidy Pickett and Louise Stokes faced difficulties not just because of their gender, but also because of their race. Even their teammates harrassed them, soaking them with ice water while they slept.





“Lily-whiteism,” wrote Rus Cowan in *The Chicago Defender* at the time, “a thing more pronounced than anything else around here on the eve of the Olympic Games, threatened to oust Tidye Pickett and Louise Stokes from participation and put in their stead two girls who did not qualify.”

World War II saw the creation of the first women’s baseball league. At the time, the only National ball league for women was softball. Under the direction of Philip K. Wrigley (of Wrigley stadium and gum fame), they rewrote the rules for the women’s team to be more of a mix between baseball and softball. The players were paid well for the time, however they were required to attend evening charm school classes. They were taught personal hygiene, mannerisms, dress code, and the proper etiquette for each situation.

Femininity and beauty were a high priority for the team. In their quest to make each player as physically attractive as possible, each player received a beauty kit with instructions.



Jumping to 1972, when Title IX was introduced. Title IX prevented discrimination “based on sex” in college sports.



Four years after Title IX (further reading at the bottom of this page, Title IX has a frustrating and fascinating history and is still being challenged to this day), Chris Ernst leads a protest with the Yale women’s rowing team, protesting their lack of showers. Like the suffragettes before her, she used a shocking technique to get attention. It worked.



Nowadays, there is less concern about women's uteruses flying out when they exert themselves, and the main problems are more about equal pay, safety, protection from sexual assault, healthcare and equal treatment. We still have a long way to go, and we are millennia overdue.



There's only so much we can fit here, please follow these links or search to learn more!

Further Reading:

[Fastest girl in America, until Nike](#)

[What Nike told me when I wanted to have a baby](#)

[The Dark Reality of NFL Cheerleading](#)

[NCAA Imbalance in Covid Testing for Women and Men](#)

[NCAA Basketball Tournament Weight Room Facilities Unequal](#)

[AAGBL League History](#)

[History of Peppermint Patty](#)



[The Suffragettes of Sport – Alice Milliat and the rebel pioneers of 20th century women’s athletics](#)

[Athletics in the First Half of the 20th Century](#)

[The 1921 Women’s Olympiad, 100 Years of Womens International Sport](#)

[Sports History Forgot About Tidye Pickett and Louise Stokes, Two Black Olympians Who Never Got Their Shot](#)

[Chris Ernst, a Title IX Hero](#)

[Millennials Can’t Even Protest Right, by Ginny Gilder, former Olympic Rower and an owner of the Seattle Storm](#)

[Women’s Sports History: A Heritage of Mixed Messages](#)

[Olympic Suffragettes March on Parliament \(in 2012!\)](#)

[Sexism in Women’s Professional Tennis](#)